



# Population & Societies

## Immigrants' educational attainment: a mixed picture, but often higher than the average in their country of origin

Version française

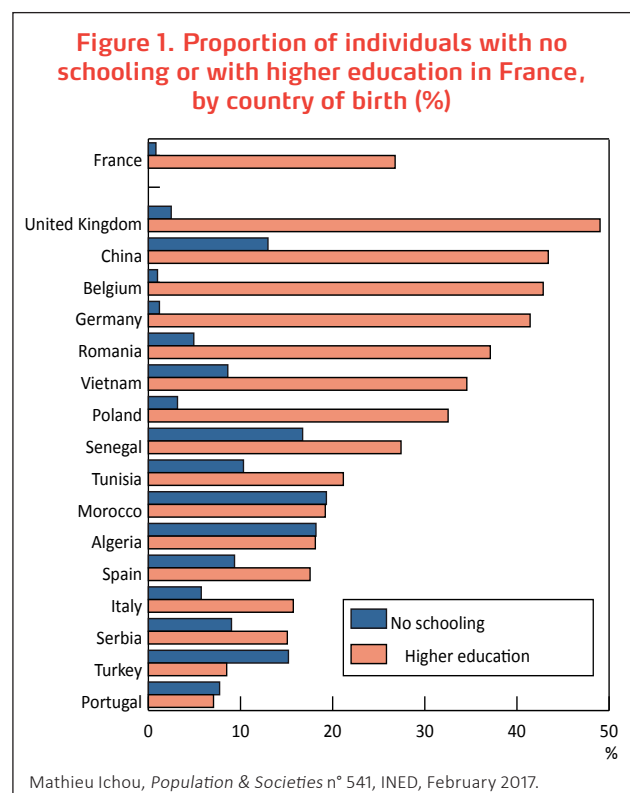
Mathieu Ichou,\* Anne Goujon\*\* and the DiPAS team

A common misconception concerning immigrants is that, on the whole, they are poorly educated. While this is true for some, most immigrants have attended school and are often more educated than the majority of people in their country of origin, as shown here by Mathieu Ichou for immigrants living in France, and Anne Goujon for refugees who arrived in Austria in 2015.

Are the immigrants<sup>(1)</sup> living in France as poorly educated as some people claim? To answer this question, it is standard practice to compare their educational levels with those of people born in France. But we can also draw comparisons between immigrants and the people still living in their country of origin, though this is all too rarely attempted. We will begin by comparing immigrants with people born in France.

### Varied levels of education among immigrants

Few people born in France never went to school (less than 1%), and more than a quarter (27%) have completed higher education (Figure 1). By comparison, some immigrant groups have very low average levels of education. This is the case for people born in Portugal and Turkey, a sizeable share of whom have no schooling (8% and 15%, respectively), and among whom the proportion with higher education is very small (7% and 9%). In other groups, the distribution of educational attainment shows greater contrasts, with an over-representation of both individuals with no schooling and of those with higher education. For example, the



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\*\* Vienna Institute of Demography (VID) and IIASA, author, with the DiPAS team, of the article on refugees in Austria (page 3).

(1) The immigrant population is made up of persons born as foreigners abroad and living in France, whatever their current nationality.

proportion of Moroccan immigrants who never went to school (19%) is the same as the proportion who completed higher education, while among the Senegalese the proportions are 17% and 27%, respectively. Contrary to popular belief, Romanian immigrants include a higher proportion of university graduates (37%) than persons born in France.

Thus, beyond an average situation of relative disadvantage compared to French-born people, immigrants form a population with very diverse levels of education.

### Immigrants in France are more educated than the population in their country of origin

We will now compare immigrants not with the population born in France, but with the people living in the immigrants' countries of origin. More precisely, we will compare immigrants' educational attainment with that of the population of the same age and sex still living in their country of birth. We can do this by matching data on the educational attainment of

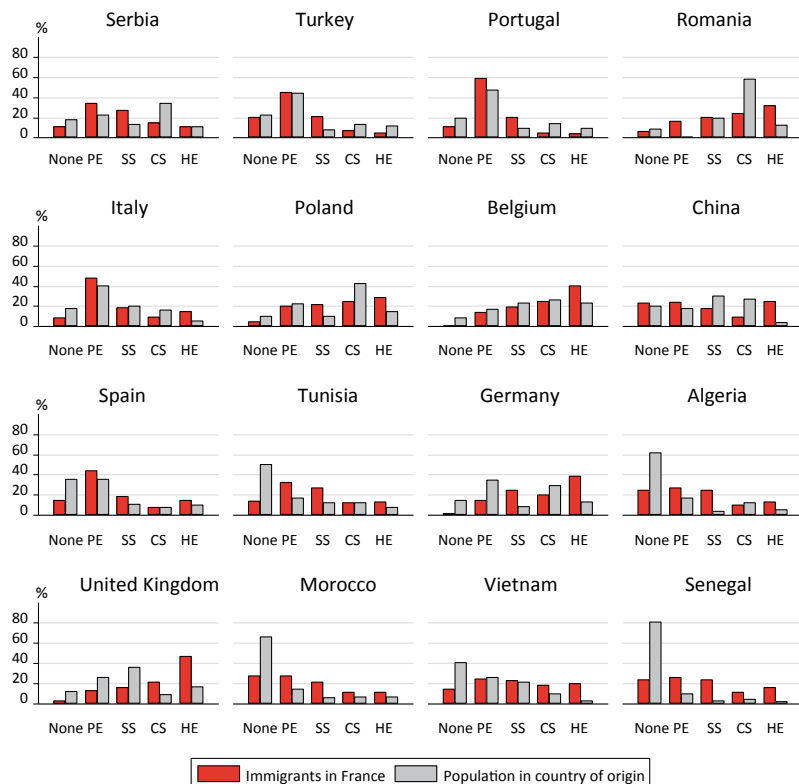
immigrants in France (here, using the 2012 population census) against equivalent data in countries of origin (here, the Barro-Lee 2013 database [1] which measures educational levels in some 150 countries across the world). Two methods are used to visualize the comparison. The first involves comparing the distributions of immigrants and of individuals in their country of origin by five levels of education: no education (None), primary (PE) some secondary (SS), complete secondary (CS) and higher education (HE) (Figure 2). The age-sex distribution of the population in the country of birth, different to that of immigrants, is adjusted to obtain a meaningful comparison.

The second method involves measuring the educational attainment of each immigrant relative to the population in the country of origin.[3] The relative educational attainment of an immigrant in France corresponds to his/her position, measured in centiles from 0 to 100, in the distribution of educational levels of persons of the same sex and age in the country of birth. [2, 3] For an immigrant, a relative educational attainment

of 70 signifies that 70% of the population of the same age and sex in the country of birth is less educated, and 30% more educated than him/herself. The distribution of relative educational attainment of immigrants who arrived in France as adults from one of the 16 most frequent origin countries is shown in Figure 3. The countries of birth are ranked in increasing order of immigrants' mean relative educational attainment.

For most countries of origin, immigrants to France are more educated than the majority of the population who remained in their country of birth. Figure 2 shows that, in general, people who immigrate to France are more often highly educated and less often have no schooling than individuals of the same age and sex in their country of birth. This observation is reflected in the fact that most immigrants have high relative educational attainment (Figure 3). In fact, excepting the four countries on the first row of Figures 2 and 3 (Serbia, Turkey, Portugal and Romania), the majority of immigrants are located to the right of the dotted vertical lines of Figure 3, with relative educational attainment of above 50, i.e. they are more educated than half of the population in their country of birth.

**Figure 2. Educational levels of immigrants compared with people living in their country of birth (%)**



Mathieu Ichou, *Population & Societies* n° 541, INED, February 2017.

**Source:** 2012 population census, INSEE and Barro-Lee database [1] (author's calculations).

**Coverage:** Immigrants in France aged 18 and above from the 16 most frequent countries of origin, educated in their country of birth (arrived as adults in France).

**Notes:** a) five levels of education are distinguished: no education (None); primary education (PE); some secondary (SS); complete secondary (CS); and higher education (HE); b) the levels of education of immigrants in France are compared with those in the population of the country of origin adjusted to the immigrants' age-sex distribution.

# The educational level of asylum seekers arriving in Austria in 2015

Anne Goujon\* and the DiPAS team\*\*

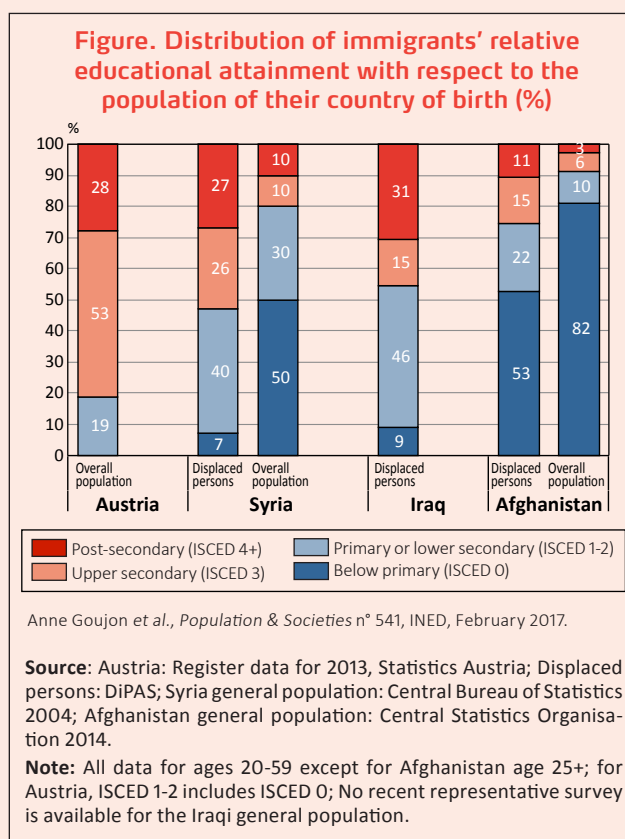
One might expect the educational characteristics of refugees, who are selected differently, to be distinct from those of the overall population of migrants as described in the main article for France. For people facing a state of emergency and wishing to seek refuge elsewhere, the decision to leave their home country is triggered by factors that are mostly linked to the crisis situation. However, given the long distances to be covered by displaced persons between their home and the countries where they seek asylum, their economic status plays a major role – since money is needed for transport and to pay smugglers when crossing multiple national borders – and economic status is closely linked to educational attainment.

This is one of the findings of the Displaced Persons in Austria Survey (DiPAS) conducted by a team of researchers in Austria. The aim of DiPAS was to study the characteristics (education, attitudes and values) of the large numbers of asylum seekers – about 60,000 people, originating mostly from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan – who entered Austria in the summer and autumn of 2015. A total of 514 adult displaced persons, mostly residing in Vienna, completed the survey interviews. Information was gathered on spouses and children, making it possible to analyse the characteristics of 972 displaced persons living in Austria.

Two main findings emerged from the educational distribution of the displaced population (Figure). First, they are much more educated than the general population in the country of origin. In Syria, people with very little education (below primary) account for 50% of the overall population aged 20-59, versus just 7% among the Syrian displaced population. Although there are proportionally more Afghans with low education, they are still more preponderant in the general population (82%) than in the displaced population (53%). The results are probably similar for Iraq, although no recent data are available for the general population.

At the other extreme of the education ladder, the proportions of highly educated people – mostly with college or bachelor's degrees – are higher among the displaced population than among the general population of the same age: 27% versus 10% for Syrians, and 11% versus 3% for Afghans. Among displaced Iraqis in Austria, 31% have completed higher education.

Another interesting finding is that the share of highly educated Austrian residents (28%) is comparable with the



share in the refugee population, among Syrian and Iraqi respondents in particular.

However, the total share of respondents in the sample who have completed an upper secondary education (26% for Syrians and 15% for Iraqis) is less than half that of the Austrians (53%).

The relatively high levels of education of the displaced population could be a key factor determining their labour market integration.

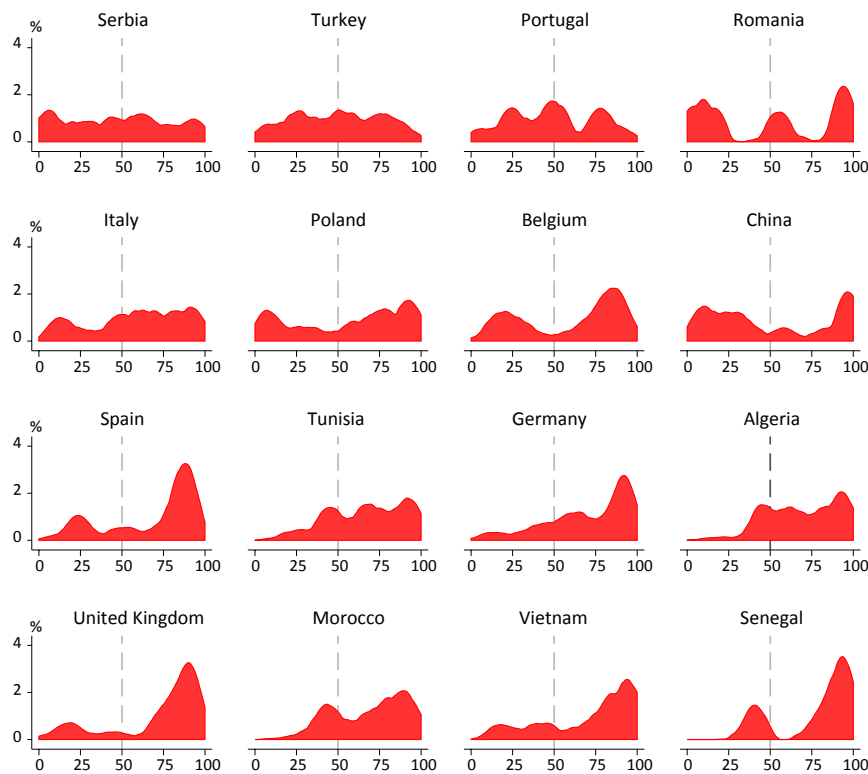
## Reference

[1] Buber-Ennsner I., J. Kohlenberger, B. Rengs, Z. Al Zalakh, A. Goujon, E. Striessnig, M. Potančoková, R. Gisser, M. R. Testa, and W. Lutz, 2016, "Human Capital, Values, and Attitudes of Persons Seeking Refuge in Austria in 2015", *PLoS ONE* 11 (9): e0163481.

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**Figure 3. Distribution of immigrants' relative educational attainment with respect to the population of their country of birth (%)**



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**Source:** 2012 population census, INSEE and Barro-Lee database [1] (author's calculations).

**Coverage:** Immigrants in France aged 18 and above from the 16 most frequent countries of origin, educated in their country of birth (arrived as adults in France).

**Definition:** The relative educational attainment of an immigrant in France corresponds to his/her position, measured in centiles from 0 to 100, in the distribution of educational levels of persons of the same sex and age in the country of birth. For an immigrant, a relative educational attainment of 70 signifies that 70% of the population of the same and age sex in the country of birth is less educated, and 30% more educated than him/herself.

**Interpretation:** In France, most immigrants from Senegal have a relative level of education above 75, which means that with respect to the population of the same age and sex in Senegal, they are in the top 25% in terms of education. Another segment of the Senegalese immigrant population has a relative educational level between 25 and 50; they are much less educated, and correspond to the second-lowest quartile of the Senegalese population in terms of education.

the labour market and housing difficulties encountered by many immigrants cannot be attributed to an overall lack of qualifications. [4]

**References**

[1] Barro R. J., Lee J. W., 2013, "A new data set of educational attainment in the world, 1950-2010", *Journal of Development Economics*, 104(C), pp. 184-198.

[2] Ichou M., 2014, "Who they were there: Immigrants' educational selectivity and their children's educational attainment", *European Sociological Review*, 30(6), pp. 750-765.

[3] Ichou M., 2016, "Accueillir toute la misère du monde ? Le trompe-l'œil d'une vision misérabiliste de l'immigration", in Beauchemin C., Ichou M. (eds.), *Au-delà de la "crise des migrants" : décentrer le regard*, Paris, Karthala, pp. 53-72. For a video presenting the main results, see: [http://www.ined.fr/en/everything\\_about\\_population/videos/education-selective-emigration/](http://www.ined.fr/en/everything_about_population/videos/education-selective-emigration/)

[4] Beauchemin, C., Hamel, C., Simon, P. (eds.) (2015). *Trajectoires et origines. Enquête sur la diversité des populations en France*, Paris, Ined Éditions, 624 p.

For certain countries, such as the United Kingdom, Vietnam and Senegal, individuals who emigrate and settle in France are practically all among the most highly educated in their country of birth, and thus have very high relative educational attainment.

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The educational levels of immigrants in France are very diverse. Immigrants are generally much more highly educated than people in their society of origin. Clearly,

**Abstract**

The immigrants living in France and the refugees who arrived in Austria are more educated than most of the population in their country of origin. By comparison with the population in the host country, the picture is more mixed: some groups, such as immigrants from Portugal living in France, are relatively low educated, while others, such as Romanians, have more frequently completed higher education than people born in France.